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DELEGATION RETURNS FROM LAOS, REPORTS ON TALKS

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[Text] The Thai delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Wong Phonninon, which was sent to Laos on 25 January to hand over salt and rice to the Lao Government, returned to Thailand yesterday. Wong Phonninon is now in Nong Khai Province to inspect the general situation along the border, while the other members of the delegation--Interior Under Secretary of State Winyu Angkhanarak; Director General of the Department of Technical and Economic Cooperation Chuchat Framunphon; Director General of the Political Department Owat Sutthiwatnaruphut; Director General of the Economic Department Chuai Kannawat Kannawat; Director General of the Information Department Wichian Watthanakun and the governor of Nong Khai Province, Chamman Photchana--returned to Bangkok yesterday.

The director general of the Information Department told newsmen at Bangkok airport that the Lao Government had warmly welcomed the delegation. The delegation was greeted at Tha Deua ferry landing by Khamphai Boupha, LPDR deputy foreign minister, Lao senior officials and the Thai ambassador to Vientiane. The Thai delegation met and exchanged views with its Lao counterpart headed by Khamphai Boupha at the LPDR Foreign Ministry in Vientiane. The two delegations discussed ways to improve relations and cooperation between the two countries.

According to the director general of the Information Department, the presentation of rice and salt to the Lao Government was held at the office of the Lao National Planning Committee. In the afternoon, the Thai deputy foreign minister and party paid a courtesy call on Phoun Sipaseut, LPDR vice premier and minister of foreign affairs and exchanged views with him on many issues, such as trade between the two countries. The Thai delegation thanked the Lao Government for the release of Thai prisoners, which demonstrates its friendly attitude toward Thailand. In the evening, the Thai ambassador hosted a reception for the delegation at the Thai Embassy in Vientiane. Many senior Lao officials also attended the reception.

Wichian further disclosed that on the morning of 26 January, prior to its departure, the Thai delegation also paid a courtesy call on Vice Premier Nouthak Phoumsavan. Wichian said that the two Lao vice premiers asked the delegation to convey their best wishes to the Thai prime minister.

The delegation's visit to Laos has helped to create a friendly atmosphere between the two countries, Wichian said, adding that the authorities of both countries will further cooperate on solving border problems.

Meanwhile, Chamnam Photchana, governor of Nong Khai Province, told newsmen that the delegation's trip to Laos has improved relations between the two countries and enabled both countries to better understand existing bilateral problems. He said both sides had also considered border issues such as fishery and cultivation on the islands in the Mekong River. The Lao delegation accepted these issues for further consideration.

The Thai delegation explained the necessity of having the Mekong River operation unit's boats, which are used to maintain peace and order along the river. The Lao authorities were informed that the purpose of the Mekong River operation unit is not to launch aggression against Laos. On the contrary, this unit can help people along the river in case of accident.

The Lao delegation proposed that five additional border passes be opened, two in Chaing Rai Province and one each in Si Chiang Mai district, Nakhon Phanom Province and Phibun Mangsahan district. The Thai Government will consider this Lao proposal.

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In making the proposal, the Lao delegation pointed out that the opening of the present border passes is not enough to facilitate contacts between the people of the two countries.

The Thai delegation also asked the Lao side to conduct a survey on the number and whereabouts of Thai nationals in Laos. The governor said that it is believed that there are still about 100 Thai in that country. So far, the Lao authorities have already released 45 Thai citizens, but there are over 20 Thai still being detained at Samkhe Prison in Laos.

Chamnan Photchana also disclosed that only 860 people have fled from Laos to his province since 15 November 1976, some 600 of whom are Meo hilltribesmen. These new refugees will be sent later to the refugee center in Nakhon Phanom. There were about 23,600 refugees in his province prior to 15 November 1976.

Further on Border Openings

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[Text] Laos has sought Thailand's agreement to reopen five border points and the withdrawal of the Mekong patrol units in the border river, Nong Khai Governor Chamnam Photchana reported yesterday. Thailand in return asked Lao authorities to provide full details about Thais held prisoners in Laos. Laos also proposed that a joint working group should be formed between Thailand and Laos to thrash out specific problems affecting the relationship between the two countries.

These were the crux of the discussions held between a Thai delegation led by Deputy Foreign Minister Wong Phonnikon and high-ranking Laotian officials during a 2-day visit to Vientiane which ended yesterday afternoon.

Governor Chamnan, a member of the Thai team said he explained to Lao officials that the presence of the Thai Mekong River patrol force is no threat to Laos. "It is our own way of protecting our people, our fishermen and our vessels," he said. The question was raised with Governor Chamnam by Lao Foreign Affairs Under Secretary of State Souban Sitthilat. "He listened to our reasoning but was still inclined on asking us to pull out our river patrol unit," the governor said.

Mr Chamnan said Lao authorities, during the discussions, asked Thailand to reopen five border points. "They want two points to be reopened first: Amphoe Mae Sai of Chiang Rai and Pakse, opposite our Amphoe Phibumngbahan of Ubon. Three other points they mentioned are Chiang Khan in Loei directly opposite their Sayaboury, Thakhek which is opposite our Nakhon-Phanom and Amphoe Si Chiang Mai in Nong Khai," the governor reported. He said at present border points which are open are at Amphoe Muang of Nong Khai and Amphoe Mukdahan of Nakhon Phanom.

In his opinion, the governor believes that there are both merits and demerits in complying with the request from Laos. "If we reopen more border points, it would be easier to control smuggling. But on the other hand, we should have to be more vigilant once new border points are open otherwise our security may be affected," he said.

The governor said the Thai officials asked their Lao counterparts during the talks to check into the exact number of Thais being held in Laos. "We want to know exactly where they are being held and whether they are sick or not. We also asked them to check whether any Thai prisoners had died. The Lao authorities promised to speed up the trials against the Thais, he said. The governor said there are about 200 Thais being held in Laos, of which 45 have been released.